

BYZANTIUM IN THE SEVENTH CENTURY

Report on a Dumbarton Oaks Symposium

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IT has become a tradition for Dumbarton Oaks to hold in the spring of each year a symposium on a theme within the general field of studies to which the institution is dedicated. The present volume includes several of the papers which were read at the symposium of 1957. In order to enable the reader to form an idea of the context in which these papers were presented a brief report is appended here, outlining the program of the discussions and summarizing in general terms the problems with which they dealt.

The symposium, which was directed by the present writer, bore the title "Byzantium in the Seventh Century." Its scope was somewhat larger than the title suggests, for in fact the program encompassed the entire period between the death of Justinian I and the outbreak of Iconoclasm, a period which is coming to be recognized more and more as one of the most critical in the history of Byzantium. Scholars working on different aspects of Byzantine civilization have concluded independently that it was during the late sixth and seventh centuries that the foundations were laid for the Byzantine Middle Ages.

Accordingly, the program was designed to range over a number of different fields; to define the significance of the period in each of them; and thus to throw light on the relative importance and the interaction of different factors in bringing about so critical a development. Of a total of eight papers the first four were concerned essentially with political, social, and economic history, the remaining four with intellectual and cultural history.

The program opened with a lecture by George Ostrogorsky dealing with the drastic territorial upheavals of the period and their effect on Byzantium's position as a world power. This was followed by a paper by Peter Charanis illustrating concomitant changes

in the ethnic composition of the peoples dwelling within the Empire and shifts in the relative importance of different ethnic groups. While both these papers were concerned with elements of change, the third lecture, again by Ostrogorsky, gave more emphasis to factors which persisted amidst catastrophes and transformation. Dealing with the internal organization of the Empire, and particularly with the survival of urban life, the paper led to the conclusion that, contrary to the views expressed by some scholars, cities and commerce continued to play an important role during this period. Robert Lopez' lecture, which followed, dealt more specifically with commerce and trade and showed that, while in regard to the pattern of international trade the period must indeed be presumed to have brought about far-reaching developments, Byzantium's role was essentially a conservative one. All four of these papers are published in the present volume in the same order and substantially the same form in which they were delivered.¹

Next came a paper by Anatole Frolow which was designed to form a link between general history on the one hand and intellectual history on the other. Based on the author's extensive researches in the history of the cult of the relics of the True Cross, the paper (since published in *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly*, N.S. 2 [1958], pp. 13-30) showed to what extent during the latter half

¹ John L. Teall's study of the Byzantine wheat economy, while not presented at the Symposium, supplements the paper by Lopez which it follows in the present volume. Dealing with a sector of the Byzantine economy in which the catastrophes of the seventh century are often assumed to have had particularly grave consequences, Teall's study shows that the extent of the adjustments called forth by the political and military events of the period should not be overrated.

of the sixth century this cult began to enjoy official and governmental sponsorship, particularly in military contexts. Pursuing a related line of investigation the present writer then attempted to define a similar and concurrent change of attitude on the part of the secular government in regard to religious imagery, and to attribute these changes to a subtle shift in the imperial government's concept of its own power and authority. Entitled "Emperors and Images," this lecture was an expansion of a thesis put forward in a study which appeared in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Number 8 (see especially pp. 121-128). As a supplement to this paper James D. Breckinridge offered a short report dealing specifically with the coinage of Justinian II and summarizing the conclusions of a forthcoming monograph (*Numismatic Iconography of Justinian II* [N.Y., 1959]). Further light was shed on the new spiritual and intellectual climate of the era in a paper by Paul J. Alexander entitled "Byzantine Literature and the Spirit of the Seventh Century," which the author has not yet been able to prepare for publication. The last lecture, again by the present writer, dealt with the major stylistic trends in Byzantine art of the period. An expanded version of this paper was subsequently submitted as a report to the Eleventh International Congress of Byzantine Studies held in Munich in September, 1958, and has been published in the Acts of that Congress.

In general, the papers confirmed for many aspects of Byzantine life the critical character of the period and its important role in laying the foundations of the Byzantine Middle Ages. On the other hand, they also served to underline the essential conservatism of Byzantine civilization, the staying power and regenerative strength of long-established traditions—Graeco-Roman traditions in particular—even amidst all the changes. This is true, for instance, in the political sphere where the concept of a universal empire survived the tremendous challenges of the age; it is true in the social and economic sphere where the adjustments called forth by political and military events were relatively far less drastic than in the West; and it is evident also in the continued strength of the classical element in literature and art.

The most obvious and tangible changes are those that took place on the political map, the catastrophic losses of territory in Italy, in the Balkans, in Asia, and in Africa, and the inroads made by barbarian invaders even in what remained of the imperial domain. One point which the discussions at the Symposium particularly served to emphasize was the great importance of the invasions of the Slavs. Depriving Byzantium of a firm hold on the Balkans, these invasions were like a deep wedge that split asunder the ancient world. Thus their effect was graver perhaps than that of any of the other territorial changes in East or West.

Some of the other developments and innovations that were discussed stand in a direct causal relationship with the physical transformation of the Empire. This is true, for instance, of the intensified contacts with the Eastern barbarians and their increased influence on Byzantine manners and customs; or of the reorganization of rural life on a semi-military basis, a development which in turn involved far-reaching adjustments in the ownership of land and consequently brought about major changes in the class structure of Byzantine society.

The repercussions of all this in the cultural and intellectual sphere are bound to have been very great, although due caution must be exercised in any attempt to establish direct causal connections. Thus the new pervasiveness of the religious element, which, in the light of several of the papers read at the Symposium, stands out as one of the most characteristic traits of the age, may be assumed to be due, in part at least, to the manifold stresses and strains to which all strata of Byzantine society were subjected. The fact that the Empire was forcibly brought into intimate contact with barbarians and unbelievers, and was on the defensive as it had never been before, may likewise have helped to produce an unprecedented emphasis on Byzantium's *Christian* identity. Moreover, the events seem to have induced the rulers themselves to promote and emphasize religious factors in their own sphere. It was a means of expressing their own subordination to—but also their role as representatives of—the only Power that amidst all the catastrophes remained truly universal.

The symposium, however, also made one aware of the limitations of a method which seeks to interpret cultural and ideological developments in terms of material ones. A synoptic view, such as was attempted here, of Byzantine history and civilization in the late sixth and seventh centuries suggests, in fact, that an inner crisis, a kind of spiritual malaise, was already in the making when such a state of mind was as yet hardly justified by political and military events. In the visual arts, for instance, it seems that symptoms of change and disintegration can already be observed in the time of Justin II, if not in the closing years of the reign of Justinian himself. There seems to be a kind of slump, a relaxation of effort after the great aesthetic achievement of the first half of the sixth century. It may well be that in other respects too the spiritual crisis was a crisis before the event, an anticipation of stresses to come rather than their product.

The general picture, conveyed by the

papers, then, was one of an age of insecurity, of suffering and mortal peril, but also of inner strength and creative opportunity. In three spheres the Empire was shown to have been particularly resilient and resourceful: the economic, the military, and the spiritual. In this last respect, and particularly in regard to religious practices, there clearly were excesses. Hence, a search for the causes of eighth-century Iconoclasm does not seem to necessitate going as far afield as some scholars have done. The overt cause—excessive addiction by the people to the cult of holy images—was a very real thing in seventh-century Byzantium. The imperial court's eventual reaction must be seen in the light of the fact that the emperors themselves, in the stress of the times, had helped to bring into vogue. On the other hand, one must not lose sight of the positive forces set free in the crisis of the seventh century, for it is they that were to give mediaeval Byzantium its strength and its character.